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Neighbors in Affluent Suburb Knew Little of Spy Suspect

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CERRITOS, Calif., Dec. 19 — The neighborhood where Thomas Patrick Cavanagh lived with his wife and two teen-age sons is a handsome suburban refuge of four- to six-bedroom homes where most households sent both spouses out to work, like the Cavanaghs, to pay for their share of the California dream.

Residents there knew little about the lanky Northrop Corporation engineer who was arrested Tuesday on charges of trying to sell advanced United States military technology to the Soviet Union. Court documents filed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the case said the 40-year-old engineer had indicated he was desperate for money to pay heavy debts.

Attorney General William French Smith said in Washington that Mr. Cavanagh was caught as he tried to sell documents related to the secret Stealth bomber program, a Northrop project, to men he thought were Soviet agents. The aim of the project is to develop aircraft capable of evading detection by radar and other sensing devices.

Until Mr. Cavanagh moved out of the couple's attractive stucco-and-frame house about a year and a half ago after they separated, some neighbors said, he and his wife, Rita, were usually seen only as they left for work in the morning and returned at the end of the day. Like Mr. Cavanagh, many of the residents work for aerospace companies like Rockwell International and the McDonnell Douglas Corporation in the nearby communities south of Los Angeles.

House Is Darkened

The Cavanagh house was darkened Tuesday night and a man's voice at the unopened door said the family would have nothing to say. The couple have two sons, Tom, 17, and Dave, 16.

Pat Knight, the Cavanaghs's next-door neighbor, said they never talked to the neighbors other than to say hello. The sons, Mrs. Knight said, had continued to attend a school in a community where they earlier lived.

Homes in the snug neighborhood of

curving, well-shaded streets could be had for about \$30,000 when the development was built a decade ago, Mrs. Knight said. Today, according to residents there, a house like the one the Cavanaghs moved into four years ago sells for about \$160,000.

Another neighbor, who identified herself only as Mrs. Butler, said the Cavanaghs "didn't have a lot of company except for family."

"People don't see a lot of each other here," she added.

A Brooklyn Native

Mr. Cavanagh was born in Brooklyn and grew up in Uniondale, L.I. A 1959 freshman class picture from the Uniondale High School yearbook shows a clean-cut young man identified as "T. Cavanagh." Officials of the school refused to release any information about their former student. Mr. Cavanagh joined Northrop from Hughes Aircraft, where he worked from 1969 to 1981.

Within the concentration of aerospace companies centered in and around Los Angeles, experienced engineers are often lured from one company to another with lucrative pay packages. Electrical engineers, which was Mr. Cavanaugh's field, according to people who knew his work, often start at \$23,000 to \$25,000 a year with no more than a baccalaureate degree.

Northrop officials, citing privacy laws, refused to disclose any information about Mr. Cavanagh's background today, saying only that he began working for them in 1981.

According to an F.B.I. affidavit, Mr. Cavanagh had told undercover agents posing as Soviet agents that he had a "secret clearance" at Northrop dating from last Feb. 10, and had been waiting for "top secret" clearance since last August. He would not get it, he said, unless he could "get the creditors off my back."

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